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A Modern Physician-Saint

Dr. Camelita P. Lapus

Dr. Lapus, a physician in Houston, Texas, gave this account of the life of St. Joseph Moscati at the 1989 annual meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds.



As Catholics, we are always encouraged to make the saints our models in life, because as the Bible tells us, we are called to holiness by God, to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect, to be a holy people by manifesting the love of God for the world in our love for one another.

It matters not whether we come from rich families or from poor ones; whether we are famous doctors or ordinary laborers. All of us were created by God to know, to love, to serve Him in whatever circumstances or surroundings we find ourselves, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven.

I want to talk to you about a saint, a fellow physician in the modern sense of the word and a brilliant one whose life should be an inspiration to all of us who are still struggling in this world and who, to paraphrase St. Paul, are still running the race to win the imperishable crown of heaven (1 Cor. 9:24).

St. Joseph Moscati was born on July 25, 1880 in Benevento, a city 40 miles northeast of Naples. He was the seventh of nine children born to Francis Moscati and his wife, Rosa de Luca. Six days after his birth, he was baptized in the parish church of St. Mark, receiving the names Joseph Mario Charles Alphonse — names which are just as impressive as those of our incoming president, Dr. Joseph Anthony Lucci.

Joseph's father, Francis Moscati, was a lawyer who became a judge in Cassino, where he met his wife. Nine years later he was promoted to the judicial bench of Benevento. Further promotions sent the Moscati family to Ancona on the Adriatic coast and finally to Naples.

In a time when open hostility to the Catholic faith was strong in academic and scientific circles, in an era when anti-clericalism resulted in the confiscation of the Papal States and the City of Rome from the Pope, Francis Moscati firmly upheld Catholic beliefs and teachings. Going against the current of secularism and religious thought which was corrupted by materialism, he imbued in his young son, Joseph, and in the rest of his children, an ardent and deep love for the Holy Eucharist by the daily attendance at Holy Mass and a great love for the Mother of God. The daily afternoon walks he took with his children along the winding and scenic streets of Naples always included a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament in one of the many churches dotting the city.

This love for the Holy Eucharist grew so strong in the heart of our young saint that later in life, even when he had a very busy practice as a renowned doctor, he always found time to attend daily Mass. The rare times when he could not go to Mass, as when he was traveling, he would note in his journals his sadness, and how much he missed the physical presence of Jesus in his heart. He would lament: "Today I have remained far from you! Not even today, O my sweet Jesus, You have entered my heart!"

As divine providence would have it, Joseph's home was just a stone's throw from the Hospital for Incurables. This daily sight of the sick and suffering and his practical love for the poor made Joseph decide on a medical career. His father approved of his decision, but his mother worried that because of his compassionate spirit, he would not spare himself in the service of the poor. She was right.

Years of Medical Schooling

He enrolled in the University of Naples in the fall of 1897. During the next six years of medical schooling, he excelled in every subject he took. Graduating with honors in August, 1903, he decided to pursue hospital work rather than a purely academic course. A year later, he won the praise and admiration of the examiners and fellow candidates with his mastery of medical science in the competitive oral and written examinations for a position in the United Hospitals of Naples.

The most crowded and oldest hospital in the group was the Hospital for the Incurables. Here Moscati spent the most of his working day, arriving promptly at 8:30 a.m. after first going to Mass and receiving communion and visiting poor patients in their homes along his way to the hospital. Later in the day there would be more housecalls and in the afternoons when he returned to his modest apartment, there would be a line of people waiting to see him in the small office he had there.

Near the door of this office was a small basket on a table with the

invitation: "If you can, put whatever you wish; if you cannot and are in need, take what is necessary."

Joseph Moscati moved swiftly up the ladder of the medical profession. Besides his hospital work, he kept abreast of new developments. He undertook laboratory research and published in medical journals over 200 articles in English, French, German, and Italian — languages which he spoke fluently.

As professor of medicine, he tried to pass on to his students his immense respect for the entire human person who is made up of body and soul. He often reminded them that people were created by God and had eternal destinies. During post-mortem sessions with his students, he frequently remarked about the emptiness of man's vanity and the fragility of his life in the words of Ps. 103:

Man's days are as grass;
like a flower of the field does he flourish:
Scarcely does the wind pass over it and it is gone;
and its place knows it no more.

There are many stories of how Moscati dealt with his patients. Among them was the famous tenor, Enrico Caruso, who had hemoptysis in 1921. He was misdiagnosed by the best American specialists who operated on him for purulent pleurisy.

Caruso returned to Italy very sick and sought the help of the best doctors in Rome and Naples, but like their American counterparts, they failed to help the dying tenor. Invited to Sorrento by Caruso and his family, Dr. Joseph Moscati made a quick and correct diagnosis of subphrenic abscess confirmed by peritoneo-centesis. The saintly doctor, knowing that the end was near, reminded Caruso that while he had been consulting with various doctors, he had neglected to consult the most important physician, Jesus Christ, to which the celebrated singer replied, "Professor, please do whatever is necessary." Immediately Doctor Moscati called a priest to administer the last sacraments to Caruso. A few days later, the great tenor died at age 48.

Saw to Healing Souls

Doctor Moscati was not just content in ridding man of his physical infirmities. He saw to it that the soul of man, which is really more important, was also healed. To him the first condition of well being was to be in a state of grace.

Although the rich and famous often sought his medical expertise, he preferred to treat the poor, and the priests and nuns who were the objects of his special affection and respect. Once, a wealthy nobleman asked him to visit his mother. Doctor Moscati explained that he would be unable to do so as he was on his way to visit a poor priest. He suggested that another doctor should be called in. But the nobleman was insistent. If he accompanied Doctor Moscati on his charitable visit first, he said, would

he then come and see his mother? It was agreed and Doctor Moscati was happy that a rich man would be taking part in a charitable work.

When treating poor patients, not only did he avoid speaking of a fee but when he noticed a person's financial need, he would hand him his prescription, and inside he would place the money needed to buy the medicine. At other times he would leave money under the pillows for the poor patient's family to discover. He also had people hospitalized at his own expense.

As a brilliant professor of medicine, he always had a large following attending his lectures. Many felt that his medical knowledge was reinforced by true supernatural charism. A colleague, Doctor Marzo, said of him, "It seemed at times that his diagnostic foresight, permeated by inward knowledge, was inspired by supernatural beings." Another one, Prof. Landolfi wrote, "His diagnoses sometimes appeared to border on the miraculous, and occasionally it seemed that angels came to the aid of someone who was so near to them." He gave clear and categorical decisions on serious cases, writing prescriptions for correct remedies, often contrary to the opinion of other doctors who had the patient under their close care; it was then he who finally cured the patient.

Throughout his life, St. Joseph Moscati who remained celibate, put God first in all things. He often quoted St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). For to St. Joseph Moscati, loving God meant loving without limit and with a perfect resignation to his will. The love he had for God overflowed into his love for the poor, the sick, those in need, and his fellow physicians.

At the Hospital for the Incurables, he was known for not talking about the faults and moral lapses of fellow physicians. He made efforts to forget the jealousy, the envy and the animosity which were at times directed at him. In the spirit of charity, he practiced great humility, which made him esteem and never condemn the actions of others. Sometimes because of his duty as a doctor he was forced to speak sharply to the people involved. No one, however, could accuse him of a word or action which could be called offensive or lacking in charity toward anyone. As soon as he realized the result of his attitude, he was immediately apologetic and tried to make amends.

All his waking hours were spent in the service of others, broken only by time devoted to prayer and further study. His untiring work to alleviate the sufferings of man began to take its toll on his health. On one visit to a patient he staggered off the train and had difficulty standing and he experienced blurring of vision. The episode passed and he continued his heavy work load. On April 4, 1927, he told his longtime friend, Father Casimiro, a Passionist priest who had been bedridden for two months, that soon he would be well and the first Mass he would celebrate would be for him. On April 12, 1927, Joseph Moscati went to Mass and received communion as usual. He went to work at the Hospital for Incurables

and told friends that, that day, God would call him. In the afternoon, he started to see patients, but at about 3 p.m. he felt ill and told his sister, Nina, that he was cancelling all appointments. He sat on his favorite chair and a few moments later died in his sleep. The distressful news spread quickly and reached Father Casimiro who, on that very day, started ambulating. The next day he celebrated his first Mass for his friend, Joseph Moscati.

All through his life, our doctor-saint showed how a person can be intellectually brilliant and professionally successful, and yet remain truly humble and detached. He showed how we laymen can attain holiness by using our God-given gifts in our daily work and family life. He showed us how a person can be in the world, fully involved in its joys and sufferings, and yet not be of the world, untainted by its materialism and secularism.

Since his death, many such people have obtained graces and cures through Moscati's intercession. There were some who saw him standing beside the beds of patients, just as during his lifetime he brought comfort and consolation to the sick by his mere presence.

The Vatican Commission which investigated his life confirmed the authenticity of the following miracles:

1. A blacksmith, dying of leukemia, said Doctor Moscati appeared to him in a vision and told him, "You are well". He immediately underwent medical tests which showed his leukemia had been cured.

2. Hospital doctors sent a man with terminal Addison's disease home to die. He prayed at the portrait of Dr. Joseph Moscati and falling asleep, he dreamed that the doctor operated on him. The next day he returned to the hospital where doctors confirmed he was cured.

3. While her teenage son was dying of meningitis, a desperate mother prayed at the tomb of Doctor Moscati. When she returned to the hospital, her son's bed was surrounded by excited doctors. Her son had suddenly recovered.

So let us end with a prayer to our fellow physician that he may always guide us in our profession which he loves so dearly.
